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THE HARVARD COURSE

IN

PHOTOPLAY WRITING



UNIT VI.

The Science
of
Marketing Manuscripts

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SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

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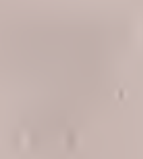
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THE HARVARD COURSE IN PHOTOPLAY WRITING

Most writers, professionals as well as beginners, know from their own experience that selling manuscripts is a science. To know how to sell a story is just as important as knowing how to write it. And often, it is more difficult for an author to master the science of marketing his work than to perfect the technique of writing.

Thousands of dollars are wasted every year in postage stamps by writers who do not know the markets, who submit the wrong manuscript to the wrong market, or who submit their work haphazardly, trusting to luck that it will fit the specific needs of the publication, newspaper, or producer to whom they send it. It is, of course, impossible to be sure of selling a manuscript to a certain market, even if one is thoroughly familiar with its requirements; but certainly the author who knows how has a vastly greater chance of selling his work than the one who trusts to luck.

Writing is an art, or a craft, as you will. Marketing scripts is a science and a business. Most literary workers live far from their markets, and the great majority have no way of keeping in touch with the ever-shifting requirements. As a result, and because of most writers' ignorance of the selling end of their profession, innumerable schemes have been devised by unscrupulous persons and firms for defrauding authors. Perhaps you, yourself, have said to your-

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self, "Yes, I've been stung! Never again! But --- how shall I sell my scripts? How can I discover whether my work has merits; and if it has flaws that preclude its sale, how can I find out where those flaws are? How can I save postage? I think I have a manuscript that is salable. What in the world can I do with it?"

Most writers have asked themselves these same questions. It is the purpose of this Unit to answer them, and to explain clearly the Science of Marketing Manuscripts. We have added this Unit to the Harvard Courses in Writing because selling your work is properly part of the profession which you are entering. As one of The Harvard Company's clients you are entitled to free criticism of all your scripts, free revision if necessary and warranted, the free use of our Manuscript Sales Department, and all other privileges. You will, therefore, have little need to apply the knowledge contained in this Unit. However, if by any chance you should decide to "go it alone," -- to "paddle your own canoe" -- as is done by some of our clients, perhaps to save our selling commission, you will find this information of vital benefit to you. While we are naturally anxious to have the handling of all your work, we did not feel that we were justified in withholding from our clients information which, properly speaking, forms part of, or should form part of, any Course in Writing. Hence the inclusion of this Unit.

There is a market for every good manuscript. Of that there can be no question. Magazine editors, newspaper and book publishers, photoplay producers, are always on the look-out for good material. New writers are continually winning success. Men and women who were completely unknown last year are today the authors of the year's "best seller," the year's best magazine story, of the feature article which the State or the town is talking about, and some of the best photoplays. There is a chance, and a very real chance, for the new writer whose work shows merit. But in addition to doing good work, he must know where and how to sell it. The writers who have succeeded either had reliable sales representatives who had mastered the science of selling scripts, or they have mastered it themselves, by constant study and experiment.

The first thing for the writer who hopes to market his scripts to acquire is the professional, business-like attitude. You, as a writer, have something to sell; therefore you present it to an editor. That means, first of all, that you must make what you have to sell the very best you possibly can. It must not bear the mark of the amateur; for the editor, as a business man, naturally expects professional work, or work that is up to professional standard.

If you were trying to dispose of an automobile, would you show it to a prospective buyer when the tires were flat,

when it was covered with dust and there were several knocks in the engine? Not unless your prospective buyer were a dealer in junk. The same thing applies to manuscripts. Writers who have good stories, newspaper material or photoplays often ruin the chances of selling their work by submitting improperly prepared scripts, marred with careless errors, bad typing, etc. Scripts are constantly submitted to editors on paper of the wrong size, rolled, tied with ribbon, handwritten, or typed in single space instead of double space, scribbled on both sides of the paper, etc.

One of the many advantages in dealing through the Harvard Company lies in the fact that our Manuscript Sales Department knows not only how to sell but also how to prepare scripts; and another, that the editors, knowing each story submitted to them by The Harvard Company to have been carefully considered for its probable appeal, READ our submissions, while returning, unread, most scripts submitted direct by the authors.

The first principle of the science of marketing manuscripts, then, is the correct preparation of the script itself. It should invite the editorial eye; it should make the prospective buyer eager to read it. Here are the simple rules covering the proper preparation of a manuscript, of any type:

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1. Name and address should appear in the upper left-hand corner of the first page.
2. The script must be typewritten, preferably on paper 8-1/2 x 11 inches, double-spaced throughout, with wide margins. Handwritten scripts, or scripts typewritten in any other way, shout loudly to the editor, "Behold the amateur!" It is advisable to use blue or black typewriter ribbon, and white paper.
3. Do not bind the pages of a script as a book is bound. Fastening the pages together at the top is more convenient.
4. Always enclose a self-addressed, stamped envelope for the return of the script if it should be found unavailable, or unsuited to present requirements. Publishers, magazine and newspaper editors, motion picture producers, and agents, are not responsible for scripts submitted to them, and it is not possible to hold them legally responsible for loss of a script by them; but they are usually courteous in reading and returning them. In fairness and honesty the author can do no less than to provide full return postage and a self-addressed envelope. Many writers are downright dishonest about this simple business rule, and as a consequence it has become the universal practice to consign to the waste basket any unavailable script not accompanied by return postage.
5. If you wish to write a letter to the editor concerning the story you are submitting ~~which~~ should never be done unless you have something of sufficient importance to say in the letter ~~it~~ should be enclosed with the manuscript, not sent separately. Likewise, the return postage or stamped return envelope should be sent with the script, not in a separate letter.
6. You should always be careful to keep a copy of your story, in case of loss. Here it may be mentioned that a story in manuscript form, that is, not yet published or produced, is protected under the Common Law, just as your wallet or your overcoat is protected. It is, therefore, unnecessary to go to the expense of securing a copyright, as some schemers would have now writers believe. The difference is this: If your uncopyrighted script is appropriated, you may take criminal proceedings, at no expense to yourself; whereas in the

case as a script which the author has paid someone to "copyright" for him, he must, if any of the ideas have been appropriated, bring a civil suit for infringement, bearing the enormous expense of the law-suits, and quite possibly of appeals, himself.

7. The script must be neat, typographically correct, and carefully gone over for errors in spelling, punctuation, etc. Any such error causes the editor to forget, for a moment, the flow of the story. Often, in that moment, the doom of a manuscript is sealed so far as that particular editor is concerned.
8. The script should be addressed to The Editor, Such-and-Such Magazine; or to The Editor, Such-and-Such newspaper; or to The Scenario Editor, Such-and-Such Motion Picture Company.
9. The title and the beginning of a script should be designed to catch the interest. If these are dull, colorless, or badly expressed, the editors know that the audience or reading public will not go further -- and so there is little need for the editors to do so.

If your script has merit, and if it is prepared correctly, you have gone a long way toward winning serious, careful consideration by the editors.

When a writer has completed a script, he often says to himself, "I wonder if it is good." (If he is like the man who never read the Bible because he didn't write it himself, he will probably KNOW that it is good.) Then he asks himself, "Where shall I send it?"

To determine the value of a manuscript, and to know where to submit it, are the two great problems confronting every author. The writer who can appraise his own work justly is the rare exception. Most of us do not know whether we have done good work until some time has passed and we re-read a

script critically and carefully. Even then it is difficult to determine whether or not it is worthwhile; and it is even more difficult to determine where it has the best chance of selling. As a result, and because of this ignorance of the markets, an author often spends many dollars in postages on a worthless script --and even the most skilful writers sometimes do inferior work-- or wastes time and money in submitting a good, salable script to editors with whom it has no chance. A case recently came to our attention that is rather typical: a writer sold a story to the twenty-sixth magazine to which he had submitted it. It was exactly the type of story that particular editor wanted. If the author in question had known his markets, or if he had had the assistance of a reliable sales representative, he would have saved many dollars' worth of postage stamps, and months of delay.

Fortunately for the writer who has neither the time nor the facilities for making a thorough study of market requirements, to say nothing of keeping it up-to-date, there are ways in which he can avoid wasting time and money.

There is, first of all, the Criticism and Sales Service offered by this company, which has stood the acid test of achievement. Since, however, this Unit is not intended to be an advertisement for The Harvard Company but a general discussion of the problems of the average writer, we shall not here enlarge upon the advantages to be gained from dealing exclusively through The Harvard Company's Manuscript Sales Department.

Despite the experience of many writers with self-styled "brokers", "literary bureaus," etc., there are honest, reliable critics and brokers whose opinion on a script is unbiased, sound, and accurate. If a writer desires a candid opinion on his work, or a criticism of it, or a judgment concerning its market value, it is possible to secure it. There are several professional, recognized critics who are in a position to help writers, both professional and beginners, either by telling them why a certain manuscript is worthless and so saving them time and money, or by helping them to improve it so that it will be salable. Most of these critics are also sales agents for scripts. Stories accepted by them for submission to editors are selected after careful analysis, and therefore have a good chance of selling.

Naturally enough, critics of professional standing, whose opinion is alone worthwhile, do not make a practice of reading any and all scripts submitted to them as an act of charity. If you consulted a famous doctor or a lawyer, you would expect to pay a professional consultation fee. So, usually, the reputable literary critic charges a reading fee, often quite small; this seems to some egoistic writers an unfair practice. They evidently believe that a critic should derive enough pleasure from reading their scripts to repay him for the time and effort expended. But it is of course far wiser to pay a reliable critic for an unbiased, intelligent and constructive criticism on a script than to succumb to the blandishments

of the literary parasites and to waste many times the critic's fee in a hopeless effort to dispose of an unsalable script.

It is the writer's natural ego and self-confidence—entirely commendable attributes within limits—that makes him the easy prey of the skillful flattery of the bogus "broker," "studio," etc. When such a schemer says, "I'll read your story without charge," the author feels highly complimented. Then when the alleged "broker" or "studio" tells him that his work is excellent, and that with a few changes, which will cost him a certain sum to have made, it will be salable, the author glories in his brilliance, signs the "contract," and digs up the necessary money. How much it would be, openly and directly, to pay for an honest opinion from a critic who knows what's what, who is familiar with market requirements, and whose constructive criticism cannot but prove of invaluable assistance to the writer.

The desire to get something for nothing is always expensive in the long run.

Clients of The Harvard Company have no excuse for allowing themselves to be victimized by the literary parasites. They have access, free of charge, to the company's Criticism and Sales Departments, which perform all those services performed by reputable professional critics.

Magazine and scenario editors, newspaper editors, etc, cannot be expected to tell the writer why his script is re-

jected. They are employed to find good scripts, not to criticize unavailable ones. Therefore, in most cases, a printed rejection slip is used. The writer, on receiving such a slip, is in a quandary. He does not know whether his story is simply unsuited to the requirements of that particular editor, or whether it is downright unsalable. Very often a reliable literary critic could solve that problem for him and by a few changes make a poor script salable. That is the work of the critic and agent. And it is the work done, among other things, by the Criticism Department of The Harvard Company.

In many instances a script rejected by several editors has been readily sold, perhaps to the same editor who previously had rejected it, after competent revision. It is the critic's job, in which he is proficient by reason of long experience and familiarity with the problems of the average writer, to find the weak points and to suggest a way in which they can be strengthened, or to strengthen them himself.

In the case of photoplay manuscripts, the free-lance writer's best markets are the independent producing companies, of which there are many. It is a little difficult to keep in touch with them, however, for many of them rent space in a studio while they are producing, but do not maintain permanent offices or scenario reading staffs. Here again the Manuscript Sales Department of The Harvard Company plays a prominent part. A further advantage in dealing through this department lies in the fact that many magazine and scenario editors will not consider

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any script unless submitted through recognized critics or agents. They have made this rule because they have found that most of the scripts submitted to them by the authors themselves were not worthy of acceptance as they stood, that they needed revision before they could be said to measure up to acceptance standards. Naturally, therefore, these editors do not care to maintain expensive reading departments when by dealing with reputable agents they may secure good stories.

Thus, in dealing with the independent producing companies that do not maintain regular scenario staffs but nevertheless offer a good market for original photoplays, and in dealing with those companies and magazines that will only consider scripts submitted by agents, the writer is again saved time and money when represented by a reliable critic and agent. A representative or a Sales Department in close touch with the ever-changing demands of the various magazines and photoplay producers can naturally effect quicker, better sales than a distant author unfamiliar with changing conditions and current market prices.

The Science of Marketing Manuscript comes to this: You have a script. You know more about it than anyone else, because you wrote it. In order to dispose of it you must either consult someone who has made a long study of the markets and of salable manuscripts, or you must make that study yourself. Everything depends upon the script, the markets it is suited to, and your knowledge of those markets. If you decide

to market your own work, do it scientifically. Don't submit scripts haphazardly and trust to luck. Instead, after a careful study of the markets where your script might sell, select the one that seems to offer the best opportunity. Then, if the script is returned to you, choose the next-best, and so on.

When an authors' representative accepts a story for sale, he does so because he believes in that story; and therefore he keeps on submitting it until he has sold it or has exhausted the market possibilities. An author should do no less with his own work. If you are confident of the merits of your manuscripts, keep them in the mail. If you are not sure of them, or if you have had repeated rejections, it is wise to consult a reliable critic -- either the Criticism Department of The Harvard Company, or some other professional who has made a thorough study of the problems confronting writers.

n Above all, keep in the ranks, keep on writing! If your first manuscript fails of a sale, write another, and yet another. Your fifth script will be better than your first, your tenth better than your fifth. You have at your command --in the Criticism Department of The Harvard Company-- a constant, capable, sympathetic advisory service. It is for you to avail yourself of this assistance. And when you have sold a script that is good enough to give you a reputation you will find that most of your earlier scripts will likewise be salable.

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